

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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This Higher Education Leaders' Forum has been extraordinarily informative and stimulating. For those of us coming from other countries and visiting Nazarbayev University for the first time, it has been educational in the best sense. Particularly memorable for me have been the following:

- The introductory discussion paper prepared for us by Lynne Parmenter, Murat Orunkhanov and Kairat Kurakbayev, which provided a superb overview of the issues facing successful universities.
- The comments of Asian Sarinzhapov, Minister of Education and Science, which were particularly impressive in their emphasis on the role of higher education not only as a driver of the economy but as a place where ethics and morality are valued, culture and tolerance are preserved, and an openness to everything new is fostered.
- The remarks of Rok Primozic, with his eloquent definition of the student perspective - a topic that was given commendable centrality in the Forum.

Several of us offered definitions of the successful university in our opening remarks. I will not attempt to summarise them here, but will simply note a few truths that emerged in the course of our discussions:

- No university is fully successful on all fronts: it is bound to be successful at some things and not at others - and much depends on what we choose to measure and how we measure it.
- A university is most likely to be successful at *some* things if it decides what it wants to be and then creates structures to bring that about, and meaningful metrics to measure its progress (as Mary Canning pointed out, measuring success is not easy). We must find the right mission and then focus on that mission. This was surely the message of Les Ebdon when he suggested that a university should "find its own uniqueness."
- Those structures hold stresses and strains in places - but the stresses and strains will always be there. Each actor has different goals: students, faculty, and administrators. In well-planned institutions they can be made to support one another, but their goals *should be* different. Creative tension is not a bad thing. Nor, by the way, is accountability to outside agencies (starting with the public itself), though such accountability must be accompanied by adequate autonomy.
- Of course, students, faculty and administrators are not the only actors whose concerns must be taken into consideration. Universities must respond to, and help shape, the public education system at the level of elementary and secondary education. They must take note of changes in the larger world and acquaint their constituencies with these changes, even as their own innovations are shared with the larger world (as Jane Knight suggested, balancing the global and the local is particularly important). They must work with politicians and government officials - who are all too eager to assess their progress against criteria of varying quality, such as university ranking systems.
- The race to succeed in university rankings leads to distortion of goals as all institutions seek to resemble the leaders regardless of the value or desirability of doing so. Rankings make decisions easy for policymakers but they may not measure the right things, a point made emphatically by Mary Canning in her remarks, even if some speakers suggested that rankings may not work very well but they are all we

have. In my view, we should speak out against the false certainty that some of their measurements imply. I might add that rankings that rely in part on asking people about their opinion of universities are really nothing more than that: by turning them into numbers, we make them look scientific. They are not. Nor are universities football teams, even if occasionally, at least in the United States, people think they are. Perhaps the worst part about rankings is that if we do well in them we are inclined to see that as a mark of our cleverness. It may be no more than the fact that we speak English, or have lots of money, or have a good reputation (a product of speaking English and having lots of money...). What matters is the vision, not the money, and innovation, not publish-or-perish.

- Perhaps a still bigger challenge is the profound change currently going on in communication, including education. What universities will look like twenty years from now is quite unclear. They may be organised quite differently, may use delivery systems quite different from those currently in place, and may award degrees differently. Wise planners will try to create open systems that allow for new ways of doing things in the university of the future, though, as Zhexenbek Adilov rightly pointed out, it is difficult to work in an environment in which lack of autonomy offers the university little opportunity to be creative: universities are not government departments, but change agents. The same, I might add, could be said of faculty: as several people pointed out, notably Matthew Hartley and Beibit Mamrayev, we need a new breed of faculty, able to stimulate change and with the independence to do so.

Loretta O'Donnell, in a memorable phrase, suggested that the role of administration should be "developing systems to liberate human capital" and Jennifer Francis spoke of the "mediating, leading" role of the university administrator. Assylbek Kozhakhmetov reminded us that a university is "a producer of public goods." The result of attention to such qualities, Aida Sagintayeva suggested, would be "realising full potential against high standards" - an admirable way of expressing what success might look like in higher education and a good message to carry away.